ROBERT NEILSON STEPHENS

THE BRIGHT FACE OF DANGER

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Being an Account of Some Adventures of Henri de Launay, Son of the Sieur de la Tournoire

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CHAPTER I.

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MONSIEUR HENRI DE LAUNAY SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY

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If, on the first Tuesday in June, in the year 1608, anybody had asked me on what business I was riding towards Paris, and if I had answered, "To cut off the moustaches of a gentleman I have never seen, that I may toss them at the feet of a lady who has taunted me with that gentleman's superiorities,"—if I had made this reply, I should have been taken for the most foolish person on horseback in France that day. Yet the answer would have been true, though I accounted myself one of the wisest young gentlemen you might find in Anjou or any other province.

I was, of a certainty, studious, and a lover of books. My father, the Sieur de la Tournoire, being a daring soldier, had so often put himself to perils inimical to my mother's peace of mind, that she had guided my inclinations in the peaceful direction of the library, hoping not to suffer for the son such alarms as she had undergone for the husband. I had grown up, therefore, a musing, bookish youth, rather shy and solitary in my habits: and this despite the care taken of my education in swordsmanship, riding, hunting, and other manly accomplishments, both by my father and by his old follower, Blaise Tripault. I acquired skill enough to satisfy these well-qualified instructors, but yet a volume of Plutarch or a book of poems was more to me than sword or dagger,

horse, hound, or falcon. I was used to lonely walks and brookside meditations in the woods and meads of our estate of La Tournoire, in Anjou; and it came about that with my head full of verses I must needs think upon some lady with whom to fancy myself in love.

Contiguity determined my choice. The next estate to ours, separated from it by a stream flowing into the Loir, had come into the possession of a rich family of bourgeois origin whom heaven had blessed (or burdened, as some would think) with a pretty daughter. Mlle. Celeste was a small, graceful, active creature, with a clear and well-coloured skin, and quick-glancing black eyes which gave me a pleasant inward stir the first time they rested on me. In my first acquaintance with this young lady, the black eyes seemed to enlarge and soften when they fell on me: she regarded me with what I took to be interest and approval: her face shone with friendliness, and her voice was kind. In this way I was led on.

When she saw how far she had drawn me, her manner changed: she became whimsical, never the same for five minutes: sometimes indifferent, sometimes disdainful, sometimes gay at my expense. This treatment touched my pride, and would have driven me off, but that still, when in her presence, I felt in some degree the charm of the black eyes, the well-chiselled face, the graceful swift motions, and what else I know not. When I was away from her, this charm declined: nevertheless I chose to keep her in my mind as just such a capricious object of adoration as poets are accustomed to lament and praise in the same verses.

But indeed I was never for many days out of reach of her attractive powers, for several of her own favourite haunts were on her side of the brook by which I was in the habit of strolling or reclining for some part of almost every fair day. Attended by a fat and sleepy old waiting-woman, she was often to be seen running along the grassy bank with a greyhound that followed her everywhere. For this animal she showed a constancy of affection that made her changefulness to me the more heart-sickening.

Thus, half in love, half in disgust, I sat moodily on my side of the stream one sunny afternoon, watching her on the other side. She had been running a race with the dog, and had just settled down on the green bank, with the hound sitting on his haunches beside her. Both dog and girl were panting, and her face was still merry with the fun of the scamper. Her old attendant had probably been left dozing in some other part of the wood. Here now was an opportunity for me to put in a sweet speech or two. But as I looked at her and thought of her treatment of me, my pride rebelled, and I suppose my face for the moment wore a cloud. My expression, whatever it was, caught the quick eyes of Mlle. Celeste. Being in merriment herself, she was the readier to make scorn of my sulky countenance. She pealed out a derisive laugh.

"Oh, the sour face! Is that what comes of your eternal reading?"

I had in my hand a volume of Plutarch in the French of Amyot. Her ridicule of reading annoyed me.

"No, Mademoiselle, it isn't from books that one draws sourness. I find more sweetness in them than in—most

things." I was looking straight at her as I said this.

She pretended to laugh again, but turned quite red.

"Nay, forgive me," I said, instantly softened. "Ah, Celeste, you know too well what is the sweetest of all books for my reading." By my look and sigh, she knew I meant her face. But she chose to be contemptuous.

"Poh! What should a pale scholar know of such books? I tell you, Monsieur de Launay, you will never be a man till you leave your books and see a little of the world."

Though she called me truly enough a pale scholar, I was scarlet for a moment.

"And what do you know of the world, then?" I retorted. "Or of men either?"

"I am only a girl. But as to men, I have met one or two. There is your father, for example. And that brave and handsome Brignan de Brignan."

Whether I loved or not, I was certainly capable of jealousy; and jealousy of the fiercest arose at the name of Brignan de Brignan. I had never seen him; but she had mentioned him to me before, too many times indeed for me to hear his name now with composure. He was a young gentleman of the King's Guard, of whom, by reason of a distant relationship, her family had seen much during a residence of several months in Paris.

"Brignan de Brignan," I echoed. "Yes, I dare say he has looked more into the faces of women than into books."

"And more into the face of danger than into either. That's what has made him the man he is."

"Tut!" I cried, waving my Plutarch; "there's more manly action in this book than a thousand Brignans could perform

in all their lives—more danger encountered."

"An old woman might read it for all that. Would it make her manly? Well, Monsieur Henri, if you choose to encounter danger only in books, there's nobody to complain. But you shouldn't show malice toward those who prefer to meet it in the wars or on the road."

"Malice? Not I. What is Brignan de Brignan to me? You may say what you please—this Plutarch is as good a school of heroism as any officer of the King's Guard ever went to."

"Yet the officers of the King's Guard aren't pale, moping fellows like you lovers of books. Ah, Monsieur Henri, if you mean to be a monk, well and good. But otherwise, do you know what would change your complexion for the better? A lively brush with real dangers on the field, or in Paris, or anywhere away from your home and your father's protection. That would bring colour into your cheeks."

"You may let my cheeks alone, Mademoiselle."

"You may be sure I will do that."

"I'm quite satisfied with my complexion, and I wouldn't exchange it for that of Brignan de Brignan. I dare say his face is red enough."

"Yes, a most manly colour. And his broad shoulders—and powerful arms—and fine bold eyes—ah! there *is* the picture of a hero—and his superb moustaches—"

Now I was at the time not strong in respect of moustaches. I was extremely sensitive upon the point. My frame, though not above middle size, was yet capable of robust development, my paleness was not beyond remedy, and my eyes were of a pleasant blue, so there was little to

rankle in what she said of my rival's face and body; but as to the moustaches——!

I scrambled to my feet.

"I tell you what it is, Mademoiselle. Just to show what your Brignan really amounts to, and whether I mean to be a monk, and what a reader of books can do when he likes, I have made up my mind to go to Paris; and there I will find your Brignan, and show my scorn of such an illiterate bravo, and cut off his famous moustaches, and bring them back to you for proof! So adieu, Mademoiselle, for this is the last you will see of me till what I have said is done!"

The thing had come into my head in one hot moment, indeed it formed itself as I spoke it; and so I, the quiet and studious, stood committed to an act which the most harebrained brawler in Anjou would have deemed childish folly. Truly, I did lack knowledge of the world.

I turned from Mlle. Celeste's look of incredulous wonderment, and went off through the woods, with swifter strides than I usually took, to our chateau. Of course I dared not tell my parents my reason for wishing to go to Paris. It was enough, to my mother at least, that I should desire to go on any account. The best way in which I could put my resolution to them, which I did that very afternoon, on the terrace where I found them sitting, was thus:

"I have been thinking how little I know of the world. It is true, you have taken me to Paris; but I was only a lad then, and what I saw was with a lad's eyes and under your guidance. I am now twenty-two, and many a man at that age has begun to make his own career. To be worthy of my years, of my breeding, of my name, I ought to know

something of life from my own experience. So I have resolved, with your permission, my dear father and mother, to go to Paris and see what I may see."

My mother had turned pale as soon as she saw the drift of my speech, and was for putting every plea in the way. But my father, though he looked serious, seemed not displeased. We talked upon the matter—as to how long I should wish to stay in Paris, whether I had thought of aiming at any particular career there, and of such things. I said I had formed no plans nor hopes: these might or might not come after I had arrived in Paris and looked about me. But see something of the world I must, if only that I might not be at disadvantage in conversation afterward. It was a thing I could afford, for on the attainment of my majority my father had made over to me the income of a portion of our estate, a small enough revenue indeed, but one that looked great in my eyes. He could not now offer any reasonable objection to my project, and he plead my cause with my mother, without whose consent I should not have had the heart to go. Indeed, knowing what her dread had always been, and seeing the anxious love in her eyes as she now regarded me, I almost wavered. But of course she was won over, as women are, though what tears her acquiescence caused her afterwards when she was alone I did not like to think upon.

She comforted herself presently with the thought that our faithful Blaise Tripault should attend me, but here again I had to oppose her. For Blaise, by reason of his years and the service he had done my father in the old wars, was of a dictatorial way with all of us, and I knew he would rob me of

all responsibility and freedom, so that I should be again a lad under the thumb of an elder and should profit nothing in self-reliance and mastership. Besides this reason, which I urged upon my parents, I had my own reason, which I did not urge, namely, that I should never dare let Blaise know the special purpose of my visit to Paris. He would laugh me out of countenance, and yet ten to one he would in the end deprive me of the credit of keeping my promise, by taking its performance upon himself. That I might be my own master, therefore, I chose as my valet the most tractable fellow at my disposal, one Nicolas, a lank, knock-kneed jack of about my own age, who had hitherto made himself of the least possible use, with the best possible intentions, between the dining-hall and the kitchen. And yet he was clever enough among horses, or anywhere outdoors. My mother, though she wondered at my choice and trembled to think how fragile a reed I should have to rely on, was yet not sorry, I fancy, at the prospect of ridding her house of poor blundering Nicolas in a kind and creditable way. I had reason to think Nicolas better suited for this new service, and, by insisting, I gained my point in this also.

I made haste about my equipment, and in a few days we set forth, myself on a good young chestnut gelding, Nicolas on a strong black mule, which carried also our baggage. Before I mounted, and while my mother, doing her best to keep back her tears, was adding some last article of comfort to the contents of my great leather bag, my father led me into the window recess of the hall, and after speaking of the letters of introduction with which he had provided me, said in his soldierly, straightforward manner:

"I know you have gathered wisdom from books, and it will serve you well, because it will make you take better heed of experience and see more meaning in it. But then it will require the experience to give your book-learned wisdom its full force. Often at first, in the face of emergency, when the call is for action, your wisdom will fly from your mind; but this will not be the case after you have seen life for yourself. Experience will teach you the full and living meaning of much that you now know but as written truth. It may teach you also some things you have never read, nor even dreamt of. What you have learned by study, and what you must learn by practice only, leave no use for any good counsel I might give you now. Only one thing I can't help saying, though you know it already and will doubtless see it proved again and again. There are many deceivers in the world. Don't trust the outward look of things or people. Be cautious; yet conceal your caution under courtesy, for nothing is more boorish than open suspicion. And remember, too, not to think bad, either, from appearances alone. You may do injustice that way. Hold your opinion till the matter is tested. When appearances are fair, be wary without showing it; when they are bad, regard your safety but don't condemn. In other words, always mingle caution with urbanity, even with kindness.—I need not speak of the name you have to keep unsullied. Honour is a thing about which you require no admonitions. You know that it consists as much in not giving affronts as in not enduring them, though many who talk loudest about it seem to think otherwise. Indeed this is an age in which honour is prated of most by those who practise it least. Well, my son, there are

a thousand things I would say, but that is all I shall say. Good-bye—may the good God bless and protect you."

I had much to do to speak firmly and to perceive what I was about, in taking my leave, for my mother could no longer refrain from sobbing as she embraced me at the last, and my young brother and sister, catching the infection, began to whimper and to rub their eyes with their fists. Knowing so much more of my wild purpose than they did, and realizing that I might never return alive, I was the more tried in my resolution not to disgrace with tears the virgin rapier and dagger at my side. But finally I got somehow upon my horse, whose head Blaise Tripault was holding, and threw my last kisses to the family on the steps. I then managed voice enough to say "Good-bye, Blaise," to the old soldier.

"Nay, I will walk as far as to the village," said he, in his gruff, autocratic way. "I have a word or two for you at parting."

Throwing back a somewhat pallid smile to my people, tearfully waving their adieus, I turned my horse out of the court-yard, followed by Nicolas on the mule, and soon emerging from the avenue, was upon the road. Blaise Tripault strode after me. When I came in front of the inn at the end of the village, he called out to stop. I did so, and Blaise, coming up to my stirrup, handed me a folded paper and thus addressed me:

"Of course your father has given you all the advice you need. Nobody is more competent than he to instruct a young man setting out to see the world. His young days were the days of hard knocks, as everybody knows. But as I

was thinking of your journey, there came into my head an old tale a monk told me once—for, like your father, I was never too much of a Huguenot to get what good I might out of any priest or monk the Lord chose to send my way. It's a tale that has to do with travelling, and that's what made me think of it—a tale about three maxims that some wise person once gave a Roman emperor who was going on a journey. I half forget the tale itself, for it isn't much of a tale; but the maxims I remembered, because I had had experience enough to realize their value. I've written them out for you there: and if you get them by heart, and never lose sight of them, you'll perhaps save yourself much repentance."

He then bade me good-bye, and the last I saw of him he was entering the inn to drink to my good fortune.

When I had got clear of the village, I unfolded Blaise's paper and read the maxims:

1. "*Never undertake a thing unless you can see your way to the end of it.*"

2. "*Never sleep in a house where the master is old and the wife young.*"

3. "*Never leave a highway for a byway.*"

Very good counsel, thought I, and worth bearing in mind. It was true, my very journey itself was, as to its foolhardy purpose, a violation of the first maxim. But that could not be helped now, and I could at least heed that piece of advice, as well as the others, in the details of my mission. When I thought of that mission, I felt both foolish and heavy-hearted. I had not the faintest idea yet of how I should go about encountering Brignan de Brignan and getting into a

quarrel with him, and I had great misgivings as to how I should be able to conduct myself in that quarrel, and as to its outcome. Certainly no man ever took the road on a more incredible, frivolous quest. Of all the people travelling my way, that June morning, T was probably one of the most thoughtful and judiciously-minded; yet of every one but myself the business in being abroad was sober and reasonable, while mine was utterly ridiculous and silly. And the girl whose banter had driven me to it—perhaps she had attached no seriousness whatever to my petulant vow and had even now forgotten it. With these reflections were mingled the pangs of parting from my home and family; and for a time I was downcast and sad.

But the day was fine. Presently my thoughts, which at first had flown back to all I had left behind, began to concern themselves with the scenes around me; then they flew ahead to the place whither I was bound:—this is usually the way on journeys. At least, thought I, I should see life, and perchance meet dangers, and so far be the gainer. And who knows but I might even come with credit out of the affair with Monsieur de Brignan?—it is a world of strange turnings, and the upshot is always more or less different from what has been predicted. So I took heart, and already I began to feel I was not exactly the pale scholar of yesterday. It was something to be my own master, on horseback and well-armed, my eyes ranging the wide and open country, green and brown in the sunlight, dotted here and there with trees, sometimes traversed by a stream, and often backed by woods of darker green, which seemed to hold secrets dangerous and luring.

Riding gave me a great appetite, and I was fortunate in coming upon an inn at Durtal whose table was worthy of my capacity. After dinner, we took the road again and proceeded at an easy pace toward La Flèche.

Toward the middle of the afternoon a vague uneasiness stole over me, as if some tragic circumstance lay waiting on the path—to me unknown—ahead.

CHAPTER II.

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A YOUNG MAN WHO WENT SINGING

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It was about five o'clock when we rode into La Flèche, and the feeling of ill foreboding still possessed me. Partly considering this, and partly as it was improbable I should find the best accommodations anywhere else short of Le Mans, I decided to put up here for the night. As I rode into the central square of the town, I saw an inn there: it had a prosperous and honest look, so I said, "This is the place for my money," and made for it. The square was empty and silent when I entered it, but just as I reached the archway of the inn, I heard a voice singing, whereupon I looked around and saw a young man riding into the square from another street than that I had come from. He was followed by a servant on horseback, and was bound for the same inn. It seems strange in the telling, that a gentleman should ride singing into a public square, as if he were a mountebank or street-singer, yet it appeared quite natural as this young fellow did it. The song was something about brave soldiers and the smiles of ladies—just such a gay song as so handsome a young cavalier ought to sing. I looked at him a moment, then rode on into the inn-yard. This little act, done in all thoughtlessness, and with perfect right, was the cause of momentous things in my life. If I had waited to greet that young gentleman at the archway, I believe my history would have gone very differently. As it was, I am convinced that

my carelessly dropping him from my regard, as if he were a person of no interest, was the beginning of what grew between us. For, as he rode in while I was dismounting, he threw at me a look of resentment for which there was nothing to account but the possible wound to his vanity. His countenance, symmetrically and somewhat boldly formed, showed great self-esteem and a fondness for attention. His singing had suddenly stopped. I could feel his anger, which was probably the greater for having no real cause, I having been under no obligation to notice him or offer him precedence.

He called loudly for an ostler, and, when one came out of the stables, he coolly gave his orders without waiting for me, though I had been first in the yard. He bade his own servant see their horses well fed, and then made for the inn-door, casting a scornful glance at me, and resuming his song in a lower voice. It was now my turn to be angry, and justly, but I kept silence. I knew not exactly how to take this sort of demonstration: whether it was a usual thing among travellers and to be paid back only in kind, or whether for the sake of my reputation I ought to treat it as a serious affront. It is, of course, childish to take offence at a trifle. In my ignorance of what the world expects of a man upon receipt of hostile and disparaging looks, I could only act as one always must who cannot make up his mind—do nothing. After seeing my horse and mule attended to, I bade Nicolas follow with the baggage, and entered the inn.

The landlord was talking with my young singing gentleman, but made to approach me as I came in. The young gentleman, however, speaking in a peremptory

manner, detained him with questions about the roads, the town of La Flèche, and such matters. As I advanced, the young gentleman got between me and the host, and continued his talk. I waited awkwardly enough for the landlord's attention, and began to feel hot within. A wench now placed on a table some wine that the young man had ordered, and the landlord finally got rid of him by directing his attention to it. As he went to sit down, he bestowed on me the faintest smile of ridicule. I was too busy to think much of it at the moment, in ordering a room for the night and sending Nicolas thither with my bag. I then called for supper and sat down as far as possible from the other guest. He and I were the only occupants of the room, but from the kitchen adjoining came the noise of a number of the commonalty at food and drink.

"Always politeness," thought I, when my wine had come, and so, in spite of his rudeness and his own neglect of the courtesy, as I raised my glass I said to him, "Your health, Monsieur."

He turned red at the reproach implied in my observance, then very reluctantly lifted his own glass and said, "And yours," in a surly, grudging manner.

"It has been a pleasant day," I went on, resolved not to be churlish, at all hazards.

"Do you think so?" he replied contemptuously, and then turned to look out of the window, and hummed the tune he had been singing before.

I thought if such were the companions my journey was to throw me in with, it would be a sorry time till I got home again. But my young gentleman, for all his temporary

sullenness, was really of a talkative nature, as these vain young fellows are apt to be, and when he had warmed himself a little with wine even his dislike of me could not restrain his tongue any longer.

"You are staying here to-night, then?" he suddenly asked.

"Yes, and you?"

"I shall ride on after supper. There will be starlight."

"I have used my horse enough to-day."

"And I mine, for that matter. But there are times when horses can't be considered."

"You are travelling on important business, then?"

"On business of haste. I must put ground behind me."

"I drink to the success of your business, then."

"Thank you, I am always successful. There is another toast, that should have first place. The ladies, Monsieur."

"With all my heart."

"That's a toast I never permit myself to defer. Mon dieu, I owe them favours enough!"

"You are fortunate," said I.

"I don't complain. And you?"

"Even if I were fortunate in that respect, I shouldn't boast of it."

He coloured; but laughed shortly, and said, "It's not boasting to tell the mere truth."

"I was thinking of myself, not of you, Monsieur." This was true enough.

"I can readily believe you've had no great luck that way," he said spitefully, pretending to take stock of my looks. I knew his remark was sheer malice, for my appearance was

good enough—well-figured and slender, with a pleasant, thoughtful face.

"Let us talk of something else," I answered coldly, though I was far from cool in reality.

"Certainly. What do you think of the last conspiracy?"

"That it was very rash and utterly without reason. We have the best king France ever knew."

"Yes, long live Henri IV.! They say there are still some of the malcontents to be gathered in. Have you heard of any fresh arrests?"

"Nothing within two weeks. I don't understand how these affairs can possibly arise, after that of Biron. Men must be complete fools."

"Oh, there are always malcontents who still count on Spain, and some think even the League may be revived."

"But why should they not be contented? I can't imagine any grievances."

"Faith, my child, where have you been hiding yourself? Don't you know the talk? Do you suppose everybody is pleased with this Dutch alliance? And the way in which the King's old Huguenot comrades are again to be seen around him?"

"And why not? Through everything, the King's heart has always been with the protestants."

"Oho! So you are one of the psalm-singers, then?" His insulting tone and jeering smile were intolerable.

"I have sung no psalms here, at least," I replied trembling with anger; "or anything else, to annoy the ears of my neighbours."

"So you don't like my singing?" he cried, turning red again.

I had truly rather admired it, but I said, "I have heard better."

"Indeed? But how should you know. For your education in taste, I may tell you that good judges have thought well of my singing."

"Ay, brag of it, as you do of your success with the ladies."

He stared at me in amazement, then cried. "Death of my life, young fellow!—" But at that instant his servant brought in his supper, and he went no further. My own meal was before me a minute later, and we both devoted ourselves in angry silence to our food. I was still full of resentment at his obtrusive scorn of myself and my religious party, and I could see that he felt himself mightily outraged at my retorts. From the rapid, heedless way in which he ate, I fancied his mind was busy with all sorts of revenge upon me.

When he had finished, at the same time as I did, and our servants had gone to eat their supper in the kitchen, he leaned against the wall, and said, "I am going to sing, Monsieur, whether it pleases you or not." And forthwith he began to do so.

My answer was to put on a look of pain, and walk hastily from the room, as if the torture to my ears were too great for endurance.

I was not half-way across the court-yard before I heard him at my heels though not singing.

"My friend," said he, as I turned around, "I don't know where you were bred, but you should know this: it's not

good manners to break from a gentleman's company so unceremoniously."

It occurred to me that because I had taken his insults from the first, through not knowing how much a sensible man should bear, he thought he might safely hector me to the full satisfaction of his hurt vanity.

"So you do know something of good manners, after all?" I replied. "I congratulate you."

His eyes flashed new wrath, but before he knew how to answer, and while we were glaring at each other like two cocks, though at some distance apart, out came Nicolas from the kitchen to ask if I wished my cloak brought down, which he had taken up with the bag. In his rustic innocence he stepped between my nagging gentleman and myself. The gentleman at this ran forward in an access of rage, and threw Nicolas aside, saying, "Out of the way, knave! You're as great a clown as your master."

"Hands off! How dare you?" I cried, clapping my hand to my sword.

"If you come a step nearer, I'll kill you!" he replied, grasping his own hilt.

I sent a swift glance around. There was no witness but Nicolas. Yet a scuffle would draw people in ten seconds. Even at that moment, with my heart beating madly, I thought of the edict against duelling: so I said, as calmly as I could:

"If you dare draw that sword, I see trees beyond that gateway—a garden or something. It will be quieter there." I pointed to a narrow exit at the rear of the yard.

"I will show you whom you're dealing with, my lad!" he said, breathlessly, and made at once for the gate. I followed. I could see now that, though a bully, he was not a coward, and the discovery fell upon me with a sense of how grave a matter I had been drawn into.

At the gate I looked around, and saw Nicolas following, his eyes wide with alarm. "Stay where you are, and not a word to anybody," I ordered, and closed the gate after me. My adversary led the way across a neglected garden, and out through a postern in a large wall, to where there was a thicker growth of trees. We passed among these to a little open space near the river, from which it was partly veiled by a tangled mass of bushes. The unworn state of the green sward showed that this was a spot little visited by the townspeople.

"We have stumbled on the right place," said the young gentleman, with an assumption of coolness. "It's a pity the thing can't be done properly, with seconds and all that." And he proceeded to take off his doublet.

I was sobered by the time spent in walking to the place, so I said, "It's not too late. Monsieur, if you are willing to apologize."

"I apologize! Death of my life! You pile insult on insult."

"I assure you, it is you who have been the insulter."

He laughed in a way that revived my heat, and asked, "Swords alone, or swords and daggers?"

"As you please." By this time I had cast off my own doublet.

"Rapiers and daggers, then," he said, and flung away his scabbard and sheath. I saw the flash of my own weapons a